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ABSTRACT

Implications of participation in highly competitive sports by children from 7 through 12 years of age are examined. Evidence supports the conclusion that highly competitive sports are often harmful to both physiological and psychological growth and development. However, through participation in sports and physical activity, children can develop desirable psychological traits, such as a competitive spirit, cooperation, persistence, achievement motivation, self-assertiveness, respect for others, and the ability to deal with success and failure. There is no doubt that competitive activities are a psycho-social phenomenon of considerable consequence in the development of young children. Additional evidence suggests that, for health-related reasons, children should be motivated to engage in strenuous physical activity. Concluding remarks focus on controversial issues related to when and how children should begin athletic competition, and evaluate several arguments supporting highly competitive sports for children. Recommendations from the 20th World Congress of Sports Medicine to safeguard the physical and psychological welfare of children are briefly mentioned. (RH)

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# Competitive Sports in the Elementary School: Psychological and Physical Implications

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# Competitive Sports in the Elementary School: Psychological and Physical Implications

"At the XXth World Congress of Sports Medicine held in Melborne, Australia, a symposium on "Sport and the Child" was presented. After much discussion and presentation of evidence from many disciplines, the following statement was released to the World Press which may prove useful to those working with the young child:

> The delegates to the XXth World Congress of Sports Medicine warn teachers, coaches, and parents of the potential physical and psychological dangers of highly competitive sports for the young child (Staniford, 1976, p. 144).

Irrespective of the cause, justification, or heed to this warning, there is an estimated twenty-million children participating in organized sports today under the guidance of over 1.5 million adults (including teachers, coaches, officials, and league administrators.) Despite the belief that competitive athletics would be replaced by other forms of entertainment in the near future, the rate of organized sports participation is continually growing with a phenomenal increase. There are more opportunities today than ever before for children to participate in a variety of sports. Organized sport qualifies as a major social institution when considered in terms of the number of participants involved, as well as the time and energy consumed (Larson, Spreitzer, & Snyder, 1976). Even the advice of physicians and educators along with the XXth World Congress of Sports Medicine's warning that competitive sports participation could be injurious to the mental and physical health of young children, there has been no observable impact on the numbers who annually compete in some form of organized sport. However, in

American society, it is normal and important to be competitive. Throughout the centuries, primitive societies and more modern forms of civilization have always devoted a part of their time and existence to play and games. For example, in everyday life, business, and certainly athletics, individuals and groups of people are constantly engaging in competitive behavior for success, prestige, status, and social approval.

It is not at all uncommon for the physical educator to consider it a fact that children learn by viewing and doing. This is exactly how a child has been introduced to competitive behavior (i.e., from the parents). "Children learn to be motivated by the incentives of rivalry and competition very early in life" (Staniford, 1976, p. 143). Children have always had a basic desire to play with other children. This desire for play has brought about a need to compete, to excel, and to be the best at a given skill, activity, or game. "Children thrive on their continuing quest for new information and for improving their mastery of personal skills" (Bunker, 1981, p. 26). Perhaps, competition has been "taught" or "practiced" within the home or it may have been learned through observations as has been formerly mentioned. Margaret Mead (1961) tells us that "competition is very much a part of our twentieth century western culture and by the time that children enter elementary school, most of them have already learned that doing things better than others is the way to gain approval and prestige" (Staniford, 1976, p. 143).

Rarely do parents question the effects of competition on the health and well-being of their children, as competitiveness is held as a cultural value by most Americans (Kenyon, 1969). "Parents seem willing, if not eager, to entrust their children to volunteer coaches of agency sponsored sports who have in general not been educated to conduct specialized movement programs, while simultaneously they reject, at an increasing rate, the bond issues that

are designed to support physical education and competitive athletics in the nation's public schools" (Seefeldt & Haubenstricker, 1978, p. 38).

Whatever the particular course competition in sport and athletics may take in this country, "it is vital to keep in mind that fact that man is competitive, that sport and athletics are the expression of fundamental human needs millions of years old, that the young will always play, that we have equally great opportunities through the medium of these expressions to inculcate in the young either valuable or undesirable social habits and attitudes, and that the point of view we as teachers take toward this whole prob lem can contribute to the character of the social order of the future and the values on which it is based" (Nixon & Jewett, 1974, p. 297-298).

There is considerable agreement in the literature that there is definitely a need for vigorous activity in children for optimal growth and development. There are also strong indications that competition stimulates participation in vigorous activity (i.e., organized sports). However, there is disagreement as to whether the values and benefits are great enough and important enough to outweigh the hazards of injury and emotional damage. As observations have been conducted on youngsters at play, it is evident that many have the same drives, urges, and needs as their peers. Yet, due to size, skill, strength, and experience level differences, some of them cannot succeed in a highly competitive atmosphere.

Many of the so-called benefits of competition for the young child have been questioned recently by psychologists, physical educators, and medical practitioners. "The argument is not with "competition" per se, but rather with the means and methods of competition and the degree to which these methods are used to develop athletes in the younger age groups" (Christie, 1984, p. 121). This paper will examine some of the psychological and physical

implications of highly competitive sports of children aged seven through twelve.

Psychologically and developmentally, the child at age 7 - 12 is emerging from a stage in which the parents were the dominant influence and motivational factor to a stage where the peer group is increasingly significant. "It is in this stage when this age group need to feel accepted, and their desire for recognition is strong" (Sullivan, 1973, p. 2). Sports can play a role in this respect. They help to develop a youngster's initiative and self-confidence. "Social play and games provide situations which are crucially important to socialization and to identity formation" (Burke & Kleiber, 1976, p. 64). Many studies show that competitive athletes are more popular and exhibit greater personal and social adjustment than nonathletes. In psychoanalytic terms, this particular stage is called the latency period. Within this stage, the conflicts and crises of family relations have been temporarily resolved with the formation of the super-ego or conscience. This is the progressive step that enables the child to be sure of love and approval; and, is considered to be an extremely crucial time in moral development.

With these new feelings, children are eager to test their validity in other social situations (e.g., sports: individual games or activities allowing for self-approval and adknowledgment; team games or sports constituting social interaction and collective achievement). Individual games or sports, of course, allow a greater possibility of disappointment or failure to occur; team sports reduce the chance for self-centered blame for loss and result in shared and distributed team blame. Therefore, there is less attention and focus on individual performance.

During this period of development, Erickson, who sees this stage as a critical one, specifies this stage as being one in which inferiority is a

dominant fear. The concern is most often expressed in group play and games where a child has the opportunity to "test himself or herself" in relation to others (i.e., the peers). "The mental curiosity and spirit of adventure, which appears to be a part of the original nature of man, found expression and satisfaction through competitions among individuals and groups or by means of the various processes of self-testing which are so prominent in the play life of the young" (Scott, 1951, p. 132). Peer attitudes and perceptions toward the child and his/her ability to perform is a major factor in the development of the child's self-concept. "Whether the child succeeds in overcoming the psychological obstacles to winning or continues to enact the personal drama of defeat, sports provide the arena for the vigorous enactment conflict between responsibilities of victory and the exemption from responsibility of defeat, which is, in essence, the decision between maturity and childhood" (Talamini & Page, 1973, p. 90). Whatever the outcome, the potential exists for the mastery over this personal issue which occurs within a cultural background of ambiguity. Sports serve as the stage for the portrayal of modern-day, symbolic competition, although "sport involvement is pattern-like, but differential" (Kenyon, 1969, p. 82).

"Competition is an enduring American value" (Dubois, 1980, p. 151). In American sports, the child has a chance to find an activity in which there is a continuity between childhood and adulthood. During this time, the child is in a cultural limbo without a clear place to call his or her own. But, even in this direction, the common dream of the American youth clouds this growth--"If a youth plays a sport well enough, he or she may drink from the fountain of youth and continue to participate in athletic competition forever, even more profitably than if he or she were to pursue another career. In other words, he or she may become a star professional athlete" (TAlamini & Page, 1973, p. 88).

This is not only a common dream of the youth, it is also one commonly held by parents, for it can be a direct method (i.e., though their child) in which the parent can vicariously gain the recognition that they once dreamed possible for themselves. "A high drop out rate in some competitive activities has been often attributed to the overzealous parental and peer pressures forcing many young children to dislike many of the popular sports at a very early age" (Staniford, 1976, p. 144). Highly competitive sports have also yielded in premature selection and specialization resulting in behaviors that tend to avoid, at all costs, participation in even the simplest of games. "An undue emotional strain, such as this, in competitive athletics is unhealthy and not conducive to a normal emotional life" (Nixon & Jewett, 1974, p. 308).

Sports are used in the service of a broader interest and fuller life; however, and quite the contrary, "athletic competition may limit personal growth in other areas" (Morgan, 1970, p. 314). Sports require many hours of extra time and practice along with the development of emotional stability, tough-mindedness, conscientiousness, self-discipline, self-assurance, trust--free of jealousy, and an increased outgoing personality. Such traits as autonomy, exhibitionism, and affiliation prove to be less general. Through observing ages seven to twelve, data show that there is a shift toward greater emotional stability and higher conscious development from ages ten to fourteen years. These data also support the generalization that increased control of anxiety, self-control, self-assurance, self-assertivenss, tough-mindedness, and extraversion all increase with age. In terms of national forms, there is a tendency for the girls to be more intelligent, more emotionally stable, have higher conscience development, become more tough-minded, more individualistic, more self-disciplined, and slightly less anxious and tense. Research indicates that boys are more competitive than girls, indicating that they probably enjoy

and seek out competition more frequently. Boys also were less anxious or "uptight" than girls prior to competition. However, "it can be stated with some degree of certitude that those who retain their motivation for competition will have most of the following personality traits: ambition, organization, deference, dominance, endurance, and aggression. There will be fewer introverted types by adult level competition" (Morgan, 1970, p. 322). Although aggression is sometimes associated with sports, "sports are one of the last outposts where physical aggression has an established, acceptable place in our culture" (Talamini & Page, 1973, p. 93).

In terms of emotional stability, studies have consistently linked emotional stability to athletic and coaching success. The trait of emotional stability may be characterized as facing reality calmly, avoiding emotional upset, learning to control feelings, avoiding feelings which may interfere with problem solving, and refusing to retreat to less mature situations for conflicts. "There are few areas of human commitment that have the potentiality for reinforcing life's realities as would be found in high-level competitive athletics" (Morgan, 1970, p. 315). The very nature of athletics requires that one place his or her ability in view of the public eye, which can result in an awareness of one's failings in an unescapable way. "As such, to be skilled, to strive, and to achieve success is the way to obtain societal rewards" (Bird, Cripe, & Morrison, 1980, p. 28). "Unconscious denial of failure or unconscious fear of placing one's talent on the line can rarely be used as an adequate defense against reality. Therefore, it is to be expected that those who remain, and those who excel will have a higher than average potential for coming to grips with reality" (Morgan, 1970, p. 315). Failure to recognize the coach's goals or failure to achieve must be accounted for through personal responsibility; therefore, emotional stability and strength is required.

However, hostilities and aggressions may arise from improperly motivated competitive situations.

Through physical activity and sport, children can experience the joys of intense and concentrated effort. In a sense, this effort is directed toward self-improvement basically through winning. "To participate in a game and not to strive is dishonest. Striving to win, an inherent goal of competition, permits children to strive for and value the process of moving toward a goal and to acquire self-control" (Bunker, 1981, p. 27). Successful athletes are achievement-oriented people and derive personal satisfaction from their striving.

It has been said by Chinese Proverbs that "life is just a game" and that one must adhere to the proper social interactions if success is to be possible. In a game situation with other children, "getting-along" and cooperation are of extreme importance to each individual. Research seems to indicate that "there is a positive correlation between cooperative and competitive response in children. The more cooperative students are also at times the more competitive individuals, whereas pupils who are not highly competitive are also not very cooperative" (Nixon & Jewett, 1974, p. 307). In summary, man behaves cooperatively under certain conditions and competitively in others. Therefore, the prime educational function of group competitive activity is the promotion of cooperative types of behaviors and the proper modification of competitive responses, so that both may contribute ultimately to individual and group welfare. "Since it is generally recognized that the development of socially acceptable and personally rewarding behavior takes place through group interaction, competitive sports properly organized under expert leadership provide situations where democratic group processes may be experienced. Self-discipline, adherence to accepted rules, support of teammates, awareness of the support of

others, and sacrifice of self for the welfare of the group are acquired in an atmosphere charged with emotion. The well-integrated and socially adjusted youth, who will be developed in part through such experiences, is the potential group-minded citizen of a democratic society" (Scott, 1951, p. 151). Competitive sports provide an opportunity for the acquisition of experiences that are considered highly beneficial to the free-man and citizen of today. Through these interactions, and individual learns much about themselves and their abilities. Thus, mutually and interpersonal dependence are also developed. Children, throughout this stage, develop in a manner in which they can begin to accept rules from their peers; while they can be active participants in devising agreements and standards for the inner-group competitive games/sports played. "It appears then that much of the psychological development and socialization that occurs during this stage is a result of the child's entrance into the culture of his or her peer group" (Burke & Kleiber, 1976, p. 65).

It is suggested that sport and physical activity can develop desirable psychological traits such as cooperation, persistence, achievement motivation, self-assertiveness, respect for others, and the ability to deal with success and failure (Thomas, 1977; Martens & Seefeldt, 1979). Therefore, there is no doubt that "competitive activities are a psycho-social phenomenon of considerable consequence in the development of young people" (Staniform, 1976, p. 143).

Concerning the physical implications that competitive athletics have on children, there is high predictability that athletic skills and good motor ability are significantly related to peer acceptance from ages ten through twelve. As Plato argued, man is more than the sum of his biological parts. "The psychological limits of exercise are reached before the physiological

limits. The emotionalized tone of competitive sports, therefore, serves to cause the psychological and physiological limits to approach each other" (Scott, 1951, p. 166).

Rarick points to the positive effects of exercise on animals and humans as supporting normal growth of bones and muscle tissue and serving as a stimulant to the development of the heart, lungs, and other internal organs. "He points out that only when the physical activity is sufficiently strenuous, and repeated often enough to bring about chronic fatigue, or when stressful enough to induce trauma to a body part, is there danger of adverse effects on normal growth" (Staniford, 1976, p. 144). Most children, even those participating in competitive sports (with the exception of swimming and track) seldom experience high-intensity physical activity (heart rate greater than 180 beats per minute)" (Gillian, 1978, p. 41).

In most games and sports, strength, endurance, and agility is required. All of these activities employ vigorous use of the large muscles of the trunk, arms, and legs, with if properly used, results in improved health. Their use has little direct effect on bodily organs and systems. However, when gradually increasing demands are incorporated on these muscles, their strength and tonicity are increased, metabolism is improved, and the functioning of the circulatory, digestive, respiratory, and nervous systems are stimulated. Explosive power, strength and endurance of the shoulder and abdominal muscles, and flexibility of the back, hips, and hamstring muscles improve. On the other hand, Ruggieri (1973) has indicated that the body of the muscle is much stronger than its attachment to the bone. The muscle can tear itself loose from the point of attachment through forceful contraction.

"During the course of exercise, there is an improved food supply to the muscles, the body tires less easily and recovers more quickly, since the

relative amount of waste material is reduced, and the ability of the body to dispose of waste is improved: (Scott, 1951, p. 166). The muscles are strengthened because of the increased number of fibers brought into use, as well as increased size of the individual fibers and bundles of fibers. In addition, with the increase in skill, strength results from economy in expenditure of energy, more efficient coordination, and quicker reaction time. These steps, in turn, result in the lessening of one's sensitiveness to pain and the development of considerable physical ruggedness. In this whole process of conditioning, the general health of the individual is improved and some evidence indicates that resistance to certain kinds of bodily ailments is increased, and the period of recovery from illness is shortened. On the contrary, there is some evidence to indicate that overtraining--a condition of chronic fatigue--renders the individual more susceptible to disease of germ origin.

Conditioning is an important factor; however, success in motor skill performance is related to the body type of the child. Body type or bone structure is inherited and cannot be altered by training. On a physical level, the child's height and weight are increasing at a constant rate, with a large growth spurt being seen around the age of twelve. "While boys are usually stronger, girls are often taller and heavier than boys" (Burke & Kleiber, 1976, p. 65). When boys reach age eleven, they are twice as strong as they were when they were six; therefore, their bones are harder and more easily broken. During the growth years, bone growth is more rapid than muscle growth. At this time, the bones lack the protection of covering muscles that they would normally receive, thus leading to an increase of dislocated joints and permanent injury to bone.

However, evidence suggests that children should be motivated to engage in

strenuous physical activity for health related reasons. One reason is that research reports that physical activity has been used successfully in reducing coronary heart disease. Another important reason evolves from studies indicating that physical activity results in less fat and higher lean body weight in young children.

There are many debates over when and how children should begin athletic competition. These debates focus on several important and controversial questions. Some of which are: 1. Are we now meeting the needs of all children through instruction in physical education, recreational, and intramural activities? Quality of these programs? 2. What kind of leadership does the athletic program have? Are leaders professionally qualified? Know and understand children? Interested in welfare of boys and girls or personal advantage--publicity, status, or financial gain through exploitation of children? 3. Are the proposed sports and other activities appropriate for the age, maturity, skill, stage of growth, and physical make-up of children? 4. Are there adequate safeguards for health and well-being through: protective equipment, adjustments in playing time and rules, competent coaching and officiating, frequency and time of day for contests, hygienic provisions, travel? 5. Is the program free of undesirable publicity and promotion? Free from unnecessary and undesirable pressures and over-stimulation? 6. Will the children who participate still have the opportunity for a balance in interests and activities or will the demands of athletic competition restrict their experiences in other worthwhile things? Other debatable questions in need of answers are: Can children play and maintain interest in organized sports in an environment where the fun is in the playing and not the winning? Can children play in an environment which meets <u>their</u> needs rather than those of adults? Can boys and girls play together successfully? Can the awareness of parents be raised

to a level which provides for positive reinforcement of the child without undue pressure? Can a new way of looking at competitive sports be introduced and accepted by a community? (Baumgarten, 1984).

It is important to also hear some of the "out-standing" views that have been published and the author's reasons for their beliefs. In the following paragraphs, these views and their support will be presented.

Taking into consideration the psychological and physical characteristics of children seven through twelve, the following is an examination of some of the typical arguments offered in support of highly competitive sports for children:

1. "Sports provide additional play opportunities for children" (Burke & Kleiber, 1976, p. 65).

On the contrary, organized sports for children may actually reduce play opportunities. In comparison to other parts of the world, our culture is lacking in play opportunities and much importance has been placed on bigtime sports which may have led children away from playtime to a system of structured sports.

It is well known to psychologists and teachers that success is the best vehicle for promoting continued learning. Crucial attitudes are being developed toward physical activity. "The child who continually fails in motor skills may lower his level of aspiration, relative to physical development. Level of aspiration, body image, and self-image or self-concept are related concepts, each contingent in this time and period on peer evaluation" (Burke & Kleiber, 1976, p. 66). The child who is continually exposed to an environment in which he or she cannot be successful, is likely to respond defensively and express hatred for all physical activity.

2. "More highly skilled athletes result from these type of programs" (Burkey & Kleiber, 1976, p. 66).

Depending entirely on the sport, participation at an early age does appear to pay large dividends. However, if participation does begin at an early age, by the time the child reaches high school, the individual may be "burned-out." Finally, it should be noted that studies indicate that beginning endurance training at an early age results in significant physiological benefits, such as greater aerobic capacity.

3. "Organized sports are safer and healthier than the sandlot variety" (Burke & Kleiber, 1976, p. 67).

Evidence supports the conclusion that highly competitive sports are often harmful to both physiological and psychological growth and development. With respect to physical damage, it is shown that excessive repetitive strain can produce severe bone and joint abnormalities. Psychological damage is more difficult to measure and handle; however, evidence shows that the child may be subjected to a kind of ridicule, resulting from the level of performance, that the child may not be emotionally equipped to handle.

4. "Children are going to have to learn how to compete; it is better to learn it early than later on in life" (Burke & Kleiber, 1976, p. 68).

This is a crucial time for development. "To the extent that the child is thrown into an environment which he finds impossible to handle emotionally, the results may be devastating" (Burke & Kleiber, 1976, p. 68). As the child grows and matures, he or she can more fully cope with physical limitations. If the child is exposed to such an experience before he or she is capable of handling it, failure may become a prominent part of their life. Finally,

the child is taking free time to compete and this may be robbing time from the developmental advantages of free play.

Additional arguments in support of children's sports are the following: Physical fitness; emotional development, stability, and outlet; social adjustments, competitive attitude, insulation against delinquency, self-confidence, enriched life satisfaction/preparation for life, childhood happiness, character development, value orientation, and self-discipline.

The most prevalent arguments against organized competitive sports for children are the following: overemphasis on winning, physical bodies are under-developed causing injuries, heavy emotional strain, psychological immaturity of players, specialization too soon, adults run the leagues (untrained and poor adult supervision), and athletics are too selective.

In summary, "children are not miniature adults in phisical, motor, psychological, or emotional development. Adult standards of success and failure should not be forced on young children" (Thomas, 1978, p. 43). "Children love to use their bodies and delight in balancing upside down, cartwheeling and imitating movements, especially those relating to animals. They need very few instructions and should just play and have fun, balancing, moving, and imitating the positions as best they can" (Balaskas, 1977, p. 151). It is important in modern society that children learn how to play and how to handle conflict and competition. For the very young child, prerequisites to intense competition should be exposure to a variety of skills and activities towards lifetime use of those skills in both competitive and non-competitive situations later on (Staniford, 1976).

In keeping with the research and thoughts presented in this paper, the following are recommendations from the XXth World Congress of Sports Medicine to safeguard the physical and psycholgoical welfare of children:

The congress personnel advise the need for careful matching of players and teams, the observation of safety practices, regular medical examinations, good officiating, responsible administration, expert instruction and guidance, and sound parental and volunteer involvement (Burke & Kleiber, 1976; Staniford, 1976).

The types and amounts of competitive activities to which children should be exposed has been, and will continue to be, a subject of considerable controversy. "Youth sport, which seems to fill a void left by school and recreation programs, is here to stay" (Bunker, 1981, p. 27). "It is naive to think that competition can, or even should, be eliminated from physical education and athletics" (Dubois, 1980, p. 151). Therefore, the issue is not whether kid's sports should exist--they will continue to grow--but rather, how to increase the likelihood of a favorable outcome.

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